



“Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them” (Ps. 111:2). A few months ago I got a pickup truck. Although I’ve enjoyed it since day one, I’m still getting familiar with all its features. A couple of weeks ago my son pointed out to me that not only do I have four-wheel drive, but I also have 4WD-high and 4WD-low. These give me greater traction and power when driving under certain conditions. The more familiar I am with my truck, the more I’ll appreciate it, and the better prepared I’ll be to use it in any situation.

On a far greater scale, that’s how the gospel works on the road of life. Many of us know its basic components and cruise along with the knowledge we already have. But then the road gets hard. We find ourselves facing an uphill climb, pulling a heavy load, or being stuck in a bad spot. So, we need more traction, more power.

Whatever we’re facing, the gospel has everything we need to get through it, to overcome it, to keep moving forward in our relationship with God and others. So, let’s study the works of God and delight ourselves in him. Today we begin our study of Romans 4 (p. 885 in pew Bible). The title of today’s sermon is the same as the hymn that we sung earlier in our service:

***THE GOD OF ABRAHAM PRAISE***  
***Part One***

**Romans 4:1-12**

Although we are beginning a new chapter, we are not beginning a new *subject*. Paul is continuing the same theme that he began with in chapter one and circled back to at the end of chapter 3: that a person is justified through faith in Christ, not by keeping the works of the law – and this applies equally to everybody.

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified [declared righteous] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [wrath-bearing sacrifice] by his blood, to be received by faith.

- Romans 3:22-25

This good news wasn’t entirely new. It had been foretold in the Old Testament. Paul began his letter to the Romans by saying so. Remember? “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, *which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his*

*Son*” (Rom. 1:1-3a). Paul repeats this in chapter 3, saying, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, *although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it* – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (vv. 21-22a).

Now in chapter 4, Paul shows that this way of salvation was not only *announced* in the Old Testament, but it was also God’s way of saving people back then also.

***God’s way of salvation  
has always been the same.***

For all people, for all time. To prove his point, Paul singles out two of the most esteemed characters in the Old Testament: Abraham and David.

- Abraham was the father of the nation Israel and was called “the friend of God” (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23).
- David was “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22) and Israel’s greatest king – the one by whom all other kings were measured.

Abraham and David appear in the first verse of the New Testament, Matthew 1:1: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

If anyone had the moral credentials to merit salvation by their own righteousness, it was these two men. But Paul shows that they too were sinners and were saved the same way that everyone else is – by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

**The Trust of Abraham  
(vv. 1-5)**

<sup>1</sup> What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.<sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” <sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. <sup>5</sup> And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness....

The word “gained” in verse one is the Greek word *heurisko*, which means “to find; to discover.” It’s where we get the expression, “*Eureka!*” – an exclamation of triumph at a discovery. That’s why I like the NASV translation of verse 1: “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?”

What Abraham discovered was the righteousness which comes through faith, not as a result of doing good works. Verse 2: “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” Paul then backs his claim

by appealing to the highest authority: “For what does the Scripture say?” (4:3a). That’s one of the most important questions that we can ever ask, because Scripture is the very word of God. Here Paul quotes Genesis 15:6: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

This is the first time the word “believed” is used in Scripture, and it’s connected to “righteousness.” It is *counted* as righteousness. “Counted” is the Greek word *logizomai*. It’s an accounting term which means to credit or impute to one’s account. Paul uses this word eleven times (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24 – I counted! 😊)

- When Paul wrote to Philemon, asking him to forgive his servant Onesimus who had run away but had since become a believer, Paul said, “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.” The debt wasn’t Paul’s, but he was willing to pay it for the sake of Onesimus.
- Or to use a more recent illustration, the other night my wife Ruthie took our family out to dinner. It was her treat. Then we came back to the house to eat ice cream sundaes and watch a movie. Ethan went to the store to get ice cream, while I went home to pick a movie on Amazon Prime. I noticed that the rental was actually on Elijah’s account, so I told him that I’d reimburse him. He said not to worry about it. So I enjoyed dinner, dessert, and a movie without any of them being charged to me. It was a good night!

In the same way, Abraham’s righteousness wasn’t his own. It was God’s righteousness, which he graciously credited to Abraham. Why? Because “Abraham believed God.” – This means more than believing in God’s existence or his overall reliability. Scripture says that Abraham believed the promises that God made to him, which included the Gospel. Jesus told the Jews who rejected him, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). By faith, Abraham looked forward to the coming of Christ. In Galatians, Paul refers back to God’s promises to Abraham and says,

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.

- Galatians 3:16 NIV

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Rom. 4:3). Now Paul expounds on that point in verses 4-5: “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

When you get your paycheck, you don’t say to your employer, “Thanks for the gift!” It’s not a gift because you worked for it! But that’s *not* the way that righteousness is received. It doesn’t come as a wage from working for it, but as a gift by believing “in him who justifies the ungodly.” That’s what Abraham did. When God justified Abraham, he was ungodly. He came from a family of idolaters (see Joshua 24:2-3).

Even after Abraham responded to God's call and set out on his new life, at times his old way of life raised its ugly head – like when he lied and through Sarah under the bus to save his own skin – *twice* (Genesis 13, 20)!

Even Abraham's faith wasn't a good work that he exercised on his own accord. It was and is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). As one commentator put it, "Trusting God is definitely not to be regarded as a work performed by the righteous; rather, it is the only recourse of the wicked."<sup>1</sup> Abraham knew that he had no righteousness of his own that would commend him to God. God is the one who rescued unrighteous Abraham. God took the initiative and promised to bless Abraham. "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3; Gen. 15:6).

Abraham's trust in God is proof of justification by faith. But Paul corroborates the trust of Abraham with the testimony of David.

### **The Testimony of David (vv. 6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;

<sup>8</sup> blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

- Romans 4:6-8

The words "just as" at the beginning of verse 6 indicate consistency. The way of salvation for David was no different than it was for Abraham. Paul is following the Jewish (and scriptural) principle of establishing the truth from the mouth of at least two witnesses. In Psalm 32, David expresses what the experience of Abraham exemplifies – that sinners are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). This is good news! No wonder David repeats the word "blessed" in his testimony.

Notice, too, the word "count" – the same word that is used of Abraham in Genesis 15:6. Only here David uses it in a negative sense, saying that justification includes not only the positive imputation of righteousness, but also the non-imputation of sin. "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will *not* count his sin." The word "not" is a double negative (*ou me*) in the original language. The literal translation would be, "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will *not never* count his sin." That is grammatically incorrect, but theologically it is spot on.

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<sup>1</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary, general editor D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 206.

David had been guilty of adultery and murder, yet he is relishing and rejoicing in the full pardon and forgiveness God provides for those who repent. Like Abraham, David looked forward to the coming of Christ. Some of the most specific prophecies about the Messiah were written by David (e.g., Psalms 22, 69, 110). David trusted in the Lord and testified of the forgiveness and cleansing that God gave him.

- ⇒ Paul uses the Hebrew Bible to convince the Jews of the gospel. He began by quoting Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17, “the righteous shall live by faith.” Then in Romans 4:3, Paul quotes from Genesis, the first book of the Law, which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Now in verses 6-8, Paul quotes David’s words in Psalm 32, the section in the Hebrew Bible known as the Writings.
- ⇒ So Paul has now shown that God’s way of righteousness through faith is revealed in all three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

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This certainly seems to be the case for the Jews. After all, Abraham was the father of Israel, and David was the king of Israel. And Paul has used all three parts of the Hebrew Bible to prove his point.

But is this plan of salvation for the Gentiles also? To answer this question, Paul presents his third piece of evidence:

**The Timing of Circumcision  
(vv. 9-12)**

<sup>9</sup> Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. <sup>10</sup> How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. <sup>11</sup> He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, <sup>12</sup> and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

- Romans 4:9-12

“This blessing” in verse 9 refers to the forgiveness that David testified about in Psalm 32, which Paul quotes in the previous verses. It’s the blessing of forgive-

ness, pardon, righteousness and salvation. Perhaps at this point some might have replied to Paul's arguments by saying, "Okay, let's say that Abraham's faith in God was credited to him for righteousness. Surely this principle is applicable only to those who, like Abraham, have been circumcised. After all, circumcision is the sign of God's covenant with Abraham.

Paul answers that argument by pointing that Abraham was circumcised *after* he was counted righteous by God through faith. In fact, it was at least fourteen years later, according to chronology of Genesis.<sup>2</sup> By describing circumcision as "a seal of the righteousness that [Abraham] had while he was still uncircumcised" (v. 11), Paul shows that this righteousness is *universally available*. In fact, Paul says that this was God's very "purpose" in terms of the timing of Abraham's circumcision. This is how Abraham became the father of all who believe, both the circumcised and the uncircumcised, both Jews and Gentiles.

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For all people, for all time. This is Good News. Do you truly understand it? If so, then . . .

1. *It should humble you.* To receive God's righteousness by faith, you must acknowledge that you are "ungodly" apart from his grace, and that your best deeds are filthy rags in the sight of God apart from Christ. The gospel removes all grounds for boasting except in the cross of Christ. For it was there on the cross that Jesus bore the sins of all who would believe in him. Speaking prophetically through Isaiah the prophet, God said of his Son, "When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied, [for] my righteous servant will make many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins" (Isa. 53:11). The gospel doesn't fill us with pride; it fills us with praise – praise to him who loved us and gave himself for us.
2. *It should encourage you.* When you feel crushed by the guilt of your sin and feel unworthy to come into God's presence, remember that your acceptance by God is not based on your righteousness but on Jesus' righteousness. "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." That's a double negative. It means no, not ever. If you believe in Christ as your Savior, your sins were already credited to him on the cross.

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<sup>2</sup> "Thirteen years after Ishmael's birth (Gen. 17:25; cf. 17:1, 24, with 16:16). And the narrative sequence of Genesis implies that Ishmael's conception (Gen. 16:3-4) came after the promise of Genesis 15:4-5, that Abraham would yet have a son of his own to be his heir and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. It was through believing acceptance of this promise that Abraham was justified (Gen. 15:6)." F. F. Bruce, *Romans*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 6, gen. ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985, reprinted 2008), p. 119. With respect to Bruce's last sentence I would say that Abraham's "believing acceptance" included not only the promise of a son and numerous descendants, but also the gospel itself (John 8:56).

They were charged to Jesus' account, and he paid it all. "Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow."

When Satan tempts me to despair  
And tells me of the guilt within,  
Upward I look and see Him there  
Who made an end of all my sin.

Because the sinless Savior died,  
My sinful soul is *counted* free;  
For God, the Just, is satisfied  
To look on him and pardon me.

That's the wonder of the gospel. That's why we praise the God of Abraham.  
To God be the glory, great things he has done.